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NASIS

NEBRASKA ANNUAL SOCIAL INDICATORS SURVEY

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NEBRASKANS VIEW THEIR LEGISLATURE

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The Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey

David R. Johnson - 1984 Study Director

The findings in this report are based on data collected in the eighth Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey (NASIS). This survey is part of an on-going study of the quality of life in Nebraska conducted by the Bureau of Sociological Research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

The sample for the 1984 NASIS consists of 935 respondents eighteen years of age or older residing in households in Nebraska. The sample is selected through a process called random digit dialing: within each three-digit prefix in the state, four-digit numbers are selected randomly from all possible four-digit numbers to complete the telephone number. Respondents are further chosen randomly from the adults in the household and interviewed over the telephone by experienced, professional interviewers from the offices of the Bureau of Sociological Research. All interviewing was done during March and April of 1984. This procedure produces a high-quality, representative sample of Nebraska adults. Analysis shows the sample to be representative of the state on age, sex, race, and geographical distribution.

The interview averaged approximately 35 minutes and included questions about energy use, recreation, political attitudes, occupation, education, family life, and other matters reflecting the quality of life experienced in the state. For the entire sample, the chances are 95 in 100 that the true value for the population lies within a range equal to the reported survey percentage plus or minus 3.3 percent. This is an estimate of maximum error and for most items the percentages are likely to be even more accurate.

The data gathered by NASIS are used by a wide variety of State and local government agencies for policy and program planning and by faculty and students at the University of Nebraska and other colleges for research. No information identifying any respondent is released to any user and the strict confidentiality of individual respondents is rigidly enforced. While the final responsibility for the organization and structure of the survey and for reports produced under its name rests with the Bureau of Sociological Research, public agencies and University departments play an integral part in planning the survey through an Advisory Committee. Public organizations interested in membership on the Advisory Committee should contact the NASIS Study Director.

Funding for NASIS comes from the University of Nebraska, the Bureau of Sociological Research and State and local agencies which buy items and data analysis from the survey.

The NASIS surveys are repeated each year to measure changes in the quality of life in Nebraska. While there is a core of questions which is included every year, each survey has a large component of unique items which address specific topical issues. Plans for future years include continuing to reinterview the 1977 panel every two years to assess changes in their lives. Additional detail on the NASIS surveys can be obtained by contacting the NASIS Study Director at the Bureau of Sociological Research or by sending for a copy of the 1985 NASIS Prospectus.

NEBRASKANS VIEW THEIR LEGISLATURE

INTRODUCTION

Nebraska's legislative system is unique in two important respects. It is the only state legislative body with only one house, and it is the only one whose members are elected on a ballot without party labels. In these two respects, Nebraska's legislature more resembles hundreds of local legislatures (city councils) around the nation than it does other state legislatures. Nebraska's unique system is pointed to with pride by not only many of its members, but also journalists and others who follow state politics. Several other states in recent years have considered the Nebraska one-house model in attempts to reform their own legislative bodies.

Despite these features and the publicity they are given, in 1978, a survey showed that while most Nebraskans knew that Nebraska has a one house legislature, only a small minority knew that their legislature was a nonpartisan body.[1] Despite the seeming simplicity of our small legislature, awareness of it and its members were no greater than in other states with very large two house legislatures.

Eight years have elapsed since that initial report. During that time, educational levels in Nebraska continue to increase, and journalists and academics continue to pour out a steady stream of information about the functions and activities of the Unicameral. Proposals to convert to a partisan ballot are considered almost every year, and are strongly supported not only by the political parties but by many others as well. Has this activity resulted in more awareness about the basic structure of

Nebraska's legislature? In this report we will explore changes in awareness between the time of the initial report in 1978 and the time of a second survey done in 1984.

This paper reports the results of a statewide survey of Nebraskans done in the late winter and spring of 1984. The Bureau of Sociological Research of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln did the random statewide survey of over 900 households. The interviews were done on the phone. Each person interviewed was asked the following questions:

Most state legislatures have two houses, a Senate and a House of Representatives. As far as you know, does the Nebraska Legislature have one house or two?

(If one): Are you satisfied with the one house legislature or would you like to see Nebraska have a two house legislature?

As far as you know, are candidates for the state legislature identified with party labels on the ballot?

(If No): Do you favor or oppose the efforts being made to put party labels on the ballots?

How would you rate the job the state legislature is doing? Would you say it was excellent, good, fair, or poor?

The questions were worded to test familiarity with the ideas and not to test whether respondents knew the "jargon," of unicameralism or nonpartisanship.[2]

HOW AWARE ARE NEBRASKANS?

Table 1 indicates that Nebraskans were no more informed about the basic structure of the legislature in 1984 than they were in 1978. Almost identical proportions, 20% in 1978 and 22%, knew that Nebraska had legislators elected without party labels on the ballots. Thus, only one in five is aware of a major characteristic of our legislature that differentiates it from every other state legislative body. This demonstrates that the controversy over whether to switch from a nonpartisan to a partisan form of election has not reached the rank and file Nebraska citizen. In fact, if we look at the further distribution of responses on this item (Table 2), we see that almost half of our sample thought we already had partisan ballots. Further, a full third of the respondents could not even guess which we had.

Nebraskans are considerably better informed about the one house nature of their legislature. Slightly over one-half answered correctly on this question (Table 1). However, the proportion answering correctly appears to have declined over time, from 63% in 1978 to 52% in 1984. Only a bare majority, then, know we have a one house legislature, while Table 2 indicates that a little less than 20% of Nebraskans believe we have a two house legislature (about the same as in 1978) while the rest (28%) said they did not know, an increase over 1978. This difference is probably not due to sampling error, but could very well be due to the slight change in question wording between the two surveys. In 1978, the phrase "most state legislatures have two houses..." was not included. The 1984 wording which did include that phrase may have caused some people who had a

vague idea Nebraska had a unicameral system to say "I don't know." In any event, it is clear that public awareness of this feature of our legislature has not increased over time.

PATTERNS OF AWARENESS

Patterns of awareness are those we might expect. For example, Lincoln residents are much more likely than Nebraskans in the rest of the state to know about nonpartisanism and unicameralism. Three quarters of Lincolnites know the legislature is a unicameral one, for example, compared to only about half of those who live in the rest of the state. Over one third of Lincolnites know about the absence of party labels on the ballots, twice as many as in small town Nebraska, and substantially more than in Omaha or in medium sized towns. It is reasonable to suppose that Lincolnites are more informed for two reasons. First, the fact that state government is located there means that many Lincolnites work for the state or have friends or relatives that do. This probably means they follow the activities of the state legislature a little more closely than do other citizens since what the legislature does affects their jobs and salaries quite directly. Secondly, because the state capital is Lincoln, the Lincoln news media cover legislative activities quite extensively. Thus, even those Lincolnites whose employment is not connected with the state have a better opportunity to read about and understand the activities of the legislature simply because it is given more press coverage than most other places in the state. This latter argument, however, probably is not so valid in comparing Lincoln residents and Omaha residents, because the World Herald too has excellent coverage of the state legislature and its activities. Nebraskans of higher income and education are more aware of these important features of the legislature than their lower income and lesser

educated counterparts. The important characteristic is education, because once that is taken into account, income differences in awareness are negligible. Only a quarter of those with less than a high school education know that the legislature is one house, for example, compared with over three quarters of those with a college degree. The majority of college graduates in this state do not know we have a nonpartisan legislature. Nevertheless, this college educated group is over four times as likely to know that the legislature is nonpartisan compared to those without a high school education, and twice as likely as those whose education terminated with a high school diploma.

Men are better informed about these basic legislative structures than are women, even when education is taken into account. People who are politically active to the extent of voting are considerably more informed than those who do not vote. Among the latter group, less than 40% know we have a one house legislature and less than 10% know we have a nonpartisan one. This difference still obtains when we take into account the education of voters and nonvoters. Thus, the self-selection process of those who do not vote probably is based in part on the fact they do not follow politics and government.

Finally, we examined whether an individual's partisan loyalties are related to this information. No consistent patterns emerge. Strong Republicans are the most informed about the one house legislature, but Democrats about the nonpartisan legislature. Once education is taken into account, there are no significant differences among partisan groups.

Interestingly, the social cleavages among Nebraskans on their degree of awareness increased between 1978 and 1984. Differences in levels of awareness between those with little and those with much education increased. Differences between Lincolnites and those elsewhere in the state

widened (in 1978, there was little difference in awareness between Lincoln and Omaha residents, for example). And sex and income differences in awareness broadened somewhat too. The reason for this is not at all obvious, except perhaps that the Lincoln media is doing a better job of covering the legislature than it used to but the media in other parts of the state are not.

ATTITUDES TOWARD CHANGE

We asked respondents who knew that Nebraska had a one house legislature whether or not they wanted to change it to a two house legislature. Overwhelming, they responded "no." Eighty-seven percent of that group who were aware of the existing system wanted to keep it that way, and only 13 percent wanted to change. Thus, it appears that the existing one house system has a secure base of public support. In comparing different groups of Nebraskans, it appears that Republicans are slightly more inclined to change to a two house system than are Democrats, and Omahans more likely that others. But, differences are very slight.

We also asked Nebraskans who knew that the legislature was elected on a nonpartisan ballot whether they would like to change to a partisan one. Here, feelings were more mixed. Of the initial small group that did know we had nonpartisan ballots, about half wanted to keep them that way, 21 percent wanted to change them, and 28 percent did not know what they thought. Thus, only about one out of ten Nebraskans know that we have a nonpartisan system and want to keep it that way. Others think we have a partisan system, or would like to have a partisan system, or are uninformed.

Democrats are more likely to favor changing to a partisan system than are Republicans, though the differences are slight. This conforms to the

view of the state's Democratic leaders who have argued for a partisan system for some time.

CONCLUSION

Participants in a recent symposium in Lincoln spent two days discussing the virtues and problems of Nebraska's unique legislature. [3] These participants, who included legislators, journalists and academics, predictably did not reach a consensus. But they did seem to agree that the unicameral feature of the legislature has the virtue of simplicity, and because of its small size and simple organizational structure, does allow issues to be dealt with quickly. Others saw that as a defect, arguing that perhaps there are not enough "checks and balances" in the legislature to stop hasty, ill considered legislation. Most agreed, however, that we are unlikely to change to a two house legislature barring some catastrophe in our political life. The unicameral feature has behind it the force of tradition, and as we saw in this study, most Nebraskans who know about it, are happy with it.

The nonpartisan feature of the legislature generated even more controversy. Some legislators believe strongly that this feature makes them more responsive to their constituents than in a partisan setting. Others counter that in the absence of political parties, legislators are more responsive , not to individual constituents, but to organized lobbies. Organized lobbies, unlike political parties, operate invisibly to the mass public. Since they are not listed publicly on ballots, voters have no way of knowing to which interest groups legislators are responsive. Indeed, political scientists have long known that weak (or nonexistent) political party structures in legislative bodies open the door to strong interest group pressure. Most knowledgable observers believe the Nebraska

legislature provides evidence for this generalization by the power of its lobbies.

Partisan organization in the legislature could improve gubernatorial-legislative relations. A common partisan link with one organized legislative group might help the governor develop more stable coalitions in the legislature in support or his or her program.

Most observers agree, however, that even if the Nebraska legislature were to revert to a partisan system, we would not see the immediate (or even longer range) development of strong political parties. Even in a partisan system, we would not see party bosses strongly influencing legislative behavior. Strong political parties are not part of Nebraska's political culture. Even when we had partisan elections to the legislature, parties were relatively weak.

Nonetheless, arguments for changing to a partisan system are fairly compelling. Party labels on the ballots provide a cue to the voter. For the not-so-informed voter, party is the best clue to what a candidate stands for (even though it is not a perfect clue, as we saw most recently in the LaRouche fiasco in Illinois). Parties provide a visible organizational structure in the legislature. Again, this provides some information to voters about who is doing what, and where ultimate responsibility should lie. In a nonpartisan system, there are forty-nine generals and no troops. When things do not get done or when bad legislation is passed, who is the voter to blame? Given that about 70% of the voters do not even know the name of their legislator, it is not realistic to expect that they know anything about legislative organization and procedure.[4] In partisan legislatures, most voters do know which party controls the legislature and can reward or punish on that basis through their own vote. This is a crude mechanism, to be sure, but as a way to provide collective

responsibility of the legislature to the public, it is superior to what now exists.

On the basis of what Nebraskans know and think about the partisan feature of the legislature, there is surely a possibility for change. However, just as it took a tireless effort on the part of George Norris to bring about the emergence of the unicameral, nonpartisan legislature, any future change of the legislature's basic structure will only come about if some individual or group is willing to give that change its highest priority. As of now, no such condition exists.

TABLE 1

NEBRASKANS' KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THEIR LEGISLATURE, 1984

Topic	Correctly Answers	Incorrectly Answers	Does Not Know	Total
One house or two	52%	19%	28%	99%
Party labels on ballot	22%	46%	33%	101%

N=935

TABLE 2
CHANGES OVER TIME IN AWARENESS OF ONE HOUSE AND NONPARTISAN FEATURES OF THE LEGISLATURE

	1978	1984
Know that legislature is one house	63%	52%
Know that legislature is nonpartisan	20%	22%

TABLE 3
AWARENESS OF STRUCTURE OF LEGISLATURE VARIES
AMONG DIFFERENT TYPES OF NEBRASKANS

	% Knowing that Legislature is:	
	One House	Nonpartisan
Residence		
Omaha (189)	49	23
Lincoln (103)	76	38
Towns of 10-35,000 (148)	51	23
Towns of Less than 10,000 (287)	46	18
Don't Live in Town (208)	54	17
Family Income		
Less than $10,000 (183)	37	17
$10,000 to $19,999 (234)	52	17
$20,000 to $29,999 (215)	54	22
$30,000 and over (177)	73	34
Years of Education		
Less than high school grad (176)	26	9
High school graduate (337)	45	19
Some post high school (256)	65	22
College Degree (162)	78	41
Sex		
Men (359)	64	30
Women (576)	45	16
Voted in Last Two Years		
Yes (323)	65	29
No (142)	39	8
Party Affiliation		
Strong Democrat (85)	54	14
Democrat (208)	49	23
Independent (189)	52	17
Republican (233)	55	25
Strong Republican (138)	64	21

Number in parenthesis is the number of cases in that category.

List of reports already released using data gathered in the 1984 Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey. These may be purchased at the indicated price from the Bureau of Sociological Research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Report Number	Title
1	Designs, Procedures, Instruments and Forms for the 1984 NASIS. David R. Johnson. Price: $7.50.
2	Nebraskans View Their University. Alan Booth. Price: $ .75.
3	Participation of Nebraskans in Voluntary Groups. David R. Johnson and Laurie K. Schueble. Price: $1.00.
4	Nebraskans Views on Regulating Health Care Charges. Keith J. Mueller and John C. Comer. Price: $ .75.